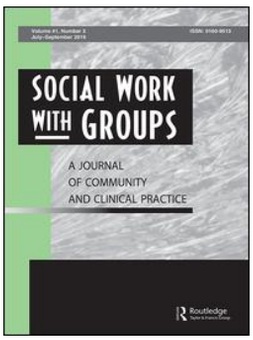

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Little Red Riding Hood goes to jail: An experience of participative writing with students and detainees

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ABSTRACT

This article illustrates how Little Red Riding Hood has been used in a workshop conducted in prison aimed at a mixed audience of students participating in a Social Work Degree Course and detainees. First of all, it presents concepts at the core of the didactic part of the workshop. Second, the methodological path that has characterized the experiential side of the seminar is illustrated. Finally, one of the results is discussed: a version of Little Red Riding Hood written in a participatory manner by inmates and students together.

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Little Red Riding Hood; fairy tale; teaching; criminology; group work; corrections; participative writing; edgework; desistance

Taking the University and the fairy tale to prison

This is the story of a criminology workshop the author conducted in the prison of "Milano Opera" that was aimed at a mixed audience of students of a Social Work Degree Course of the University of Milano Bicocca and detainees.

Two themes were investigated: transgression and self-change, experiences that unite those who commit crimes, those who do not commit them, and those who fantasize about committing them. Therefore, in the case of this workshop, both students and inmates.

The seminar is optional and is one of three conducted in the prison thanks to a 2010 cooperation agreement between the University of Milano Bicocca and the local Department of Corrections. All students can request to participate in the activities proposed in prison although spaces are limited to the class size decided by the teacher. The selection of detainees is made by prison educators on the basis of criteria that are not shared with the university. In general, in order to work with a balanced class, the practice is to obtain an equal number of prisoners and external students.

In the experience described here, due to bureaucratic obstacles within the university, the group had a very particular composition: 20 inmates and 4 external students, of whom two already participated in courses in prison. As

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for the other two, one was an educator with years of professional experience in sensitive contexts and for one this was at her first experience, so she found herself catapulted into a totally new situation.[1]

The contact with inmates was an important "social justice" aspect of the workshop, as it is a central value in the social work profession. It helped students consider how to challenge discrimination and institutional oppression, respect diversity, resist unjust policies and practices, and build solidarity (Gardella & Prinsloo, 2019).

The use of fairy tale enhanced the teaching of criminology and activated this diverse group with vastly different life experiences across gender and level of education. Originally told to adults, fairy tales are characterized by the desire to explore the experiences of those who go beyond the limits, often discovering raw aspects of reality. They are bleak; they speak of violence, rape, death but at the same time they constitute, as Gianni Rodari[2] stated in 1970: "the place of all hypotheses." That is, they remain open and stimulate creativity.

Who we are? How could we be, in the alternative? The fairy tales are emblematic of these deep questions. They enable emotions to flow (Barsotti, 2016).

According to Marie Louise Von Franz (2017), the universal efficacy of these narratives as a kaleidoscopic tool for observing existence come from the fact that they not only preserve elementary thoughts, but also the images, the poetic fantasies, the elementary emotions, and the elementary drives to act. Also, for this reason, there is no single method for interpreting fairy tales, it is an art for everyone, provided that, as von Franz points out, your whole being is committed.

So, as it pertains to social group work, fairy tales challenge the dominant political sensibilities of individualism, competition, dualism, and authoritarianism (Drumm, 2006). Group work practitioners develop the ability to say the things people have the hardest time saying, and fairy tales do the same: the things that some individuals regard as shameful, deviant, or abnormal are normalized (Drumm, 2006; Shulman, 1999). Fairy tales help to break the taboos.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the work done on the fairy tale within the workshop, which contains a didactic and experiential parts, both projected and conducted by the author. First of all, the article will dwell on Little Red Riding Hood and the reasons for choosing this particular fairy tale to speak of transgression and self-change and to present concepts at the core of the didactic part of the workshop. Second, the methodological path that has characterized the experiential side of the seminar will be illustrated. Finally, one of the results will be presented: a version of Little Red Riding Hood written in a participatory manner by inmates and students together.

The role of the group comprising external students and prisoners in the first part was to listen to the content that the author proposed, while sitting next to each other in a room made available by prison administration. In the

same room, the workshop part, strictly connected to the first one, involved the external students in a different role. As will be explained later, in some cases the students participated in the activities on par with the prisoners, while in others they assumed the role of facilitators.

Little Red Riding Hood and criminology: from theory to didactic

Little Red Riding Hood: an impenetrable narrative

Folklorists identified Little Red Riding Hood as one of the most well-known and widespread European fairy tales in the world. In a very interesting book entitled "The trials and tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood," Jack Zipes (2017) analyzed 31 versions of the fairy tale, including previous oral narrations of the first draft that was written in 1696 (Perrault, 1901).

The facets are many: in some cases, Little Red Riding Hood dies; in others, she saves herself; in others, she is saved due to the external intervention of a man, sometimes a hunter and sometimes a woodcutter. The reason for the extensive diffusion of Little Red Riding Hood can perhaps be identified in the words of Marc Soriano (1968): "it is a history so clear that it becomes impenetrable" (p. 160, *ours transl*), a narration whose mystery it seems, however, so well-guarded as to arouse in the community a perpetual desire to approach it.

If Dickens claimed to have always thought that Little Red Riding Hood was a girl to fall in love with, his charm does not seem to resist even contemporary society which has transformed the fairy tale into a ubiquitous transmedia narrative (Beckett, 2002; Orenstein, 2002). Told by cartoons and by movies, starting with Meliès in 1901,[3] Little Red Riding Hood was the subject of a TV series (including "Once Upon a Time," 2019), it has received tributes from the world of video games ("The Path," 2009), from literature (e.g., Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" in 1979), and from art – in particular through the works of Rancinan, Rego and Smith (Bonner, 2006).

Among the interpretative contributions of this elementary and universal history, which talks about crime and reaction to crime (Khom & Greenhill, 2014; Brisman, 2019) we can see two dominant approaches: psychoanalytic and feminist.

Although these two approaches have been identified as contrasting with one another (see below), an integration of the two was presented to students, which incorporated the contributions of criminology and related themes of transgression and self-change.

The use of fairy tale also allowed for using one's imagination. Fictional narratives can give meaning to emotions, connect them to actions and objectives, highlight how one emotion can be transformed into another and define the most minute nuances in the inner world of the characters; they

allow us to anchor ourselves to the lives of others and to reflect on ourselves (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

Playing with the limits, meeting the Wolf: from psychoanalysis to the concept of edgework

Fairy tales retain an enormous potential. Their function is to contribute to civilization by illuminating the chaotic pressures of the unconscious. This is the psychoanalytic perspective adopted by Bettelheim (2010) in his book, "The Uses of Enchantment." Bettelheim, an Austrian psychoanalyst who escaped the Holocaust, believed that fairy tales bring the child into direct contact with the problematic nature of life, moving children not as end in itself, but to help structure morality.

Bettelheim explains that Little Red Riding Hood embodies what, in psychoanalytic terms, can be defined as a conflict between the "Principle of Pleasure" and the "Principle of Reality." Little Red Riding Hood is attracted by the Principle of Pleasure, by the beauty of the outside world in which she finds herself strolling, a world away from home and the maternal guidance, or the Principle of Reality. In this liberated world, which Little Red Riding Hood would like to explore with a spirit of adventure, the wolf (or seducer) makes its appearance, ready to attract the girl out of the traced path:

> See, Little Red Riding Hood, how pretty the flowers are about here – why do you not look around? I believe, too, that you do not hear how sweetly the little birds are singing; you walk gravely along as if you were going to school, while everything here in the wood is merry. (Grimm & Grimm, 2013, p. 115)

Little Red Riding Hood's mother knows the character of her daughter, so much so that before her departure she recommends her to follow the path, to say good morning to her grandmother and not to poke around the house. Little Red Riding Hood, however, is so attracted by the idea of freedom that immediately succumbs to her impulses. As soon as she sees the flowers, she begins to pick them and stops only when she can no longer bear them.

Only then does she remember having to go to her grandmother. Here is where the wolf appears with his challenge, which speaks to the child at different levels. Certainly, there is a dimension of the unconscious that is activated by the imagination: Little Red Riding Hood is seduced by the wolf, by its animality, from this point of view the fairy tale also speaks of sex (see Garber, 1992; Jones, 1985; Warner, 1995). However, the wolf does not only embody the adventurous seduction of the playful creatures of the forest, but there is also a destructive component.

From the criminological point of view, an interesting image in which the psychoanalytic interpretation dwells, is the girl who decides to transgress the maternal teachings and who finds herself facing a wolf, seductive and

destructive. More precisely, from a cultural perspective, the connection with the concept of "edgework" is immediate (Binik, 2014, 2019). The edgework characterizes the activities that involve "clearly and observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence" (Lyng, 1990, p. 857; Lyng, 2004; Lyng, 2005). Among these activities is parachuting, studied at length by Lyng, but also the consumption of drugs or other forms of deviance associated with the voluntary risk taking – such as theft, fighting, and vandalism. Analyzed in criminological terms, Little Red Hood's exit from the path and her encounter with the wolf can be assimilated to the subject's search for specific situations to play on the edge between life and death, the state of consciousness and unconsciousness, health and illness, an orderly sense of self and of the environment and chaos.

Escaping from the wolf: from feminist critics to the process of desistance

Although Bettelheim's, "The uses of enchantment" is considered a classic, it was students learned that it received very harsh criticism. Jack Zipes (1991), in particular, criticized Bettelheim's psychoanalytic approach, believing that he had forced psychoanalytic meanings on the fairy tales. He focused specifically on Bettelheim's moralizing intent, accusing him of having written "Sunday sermons" (p. 258) intended to educate children to abandon the Principle of Pleasure and to embrace that of reality. According to Zipes, one cannot disconnect fairy tales from the social context in which they were born or the context within which they are used or received.

One of the aims of Zipes is to reveal the alternative imaginative worlds contained in fairy tales, sometimes enclosed in lesser-known versions. Regarding specifically the case of Little Red Riding Hood, he sees in it the story of a rape and focuses in particular on the transformation the fairy tale underwent during his first written version by Perrault, which ends tragically with the death of the girl. More precisely, Perrault is accused of having transformed a brave young woman who uses her intelligence to get rid of a predatory male (in the oral version, see Verdier, 1980)[4] in a flawed bourgeoisie who, according to Perrault, deserved to be punished for her behavior. The intention, clearly visible in the masculine morality that concludes Perrault's fairy tale, consistent with the cultural context of aristocratic France of the seventeenth century, was that the girls had to repress their adventurous spirits and to avoid going beyond their limits, exploring what it is hidden in the woods.[5]

These feminist criticisms have inaugurated a fruitful process of transmigration of the history in multiple directions, including the rewrites by Angela Carter (2012) in "The Bloody Chamber." She reinvented several Little Red Riding Hoods to appear more audacious, making them closer to the oral versions. They are girls who cut a leg to the wolf, who have sex with the wolf,

who don't need the hunter or who are even half-wolves (Duncker, 1984; Vallorani, 2012).

In the case of prisoners, the edgework led them into a trap, into a prison or, metaphorically, into the wolf's belly and the multiple versions of Little Red Riding Hood appeared interesting to focus on how we can imagine a new story or a new ending of our life, with or without the help of the hunter. In particular, the many versions of the fairy tale open the reflection on how much freedom and power we have, or how much are we bound by the social structures to which we belong. More precisely, the reflection turns on what happens when "being with the wolf" loses its charm, when the edgework is no longer exciting because the thrill linked to the deviant experience (Katz, 1988) vanishes and turns it into a routine. Over time, the criminal existence may become repetitive, unsatisfactory, tragic, resulting in a feeling of burnout (Maruna, 2001) and a need of a new story.

Among others, Vaughan (2007) has described this feeling as the first phase of a possible (never automatic) change in criminal lives, characterized by a condition of confusion that requires discernment, since different contrasting thrusts crowd the subject's mind. Referring to Giordano et al. (2002), this phase consists of two steps: an initial opening to change and subsequent exposure to a catalyst event, which can be represented by a stable occupation, a marriage or the like (defined "a hook of change").

In this framework, group reflection was conducted concerning the balance between agency and structure in defining one's change process, if desired, and which of the possible multiple versions of the story we can act. In this case too, the role of society cannot be lost sight of. It is now recognized that desistance cannot occur either due to a simple structural change or thanks to the individual motivation of the subject. Both of these factors are necessarily involved in the process (Laub & Sampson, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Vaughan, 2007). Moreover, the starting conditions weigh enormously: for agency to lead the subject toward a change, it must assert itself in a titanic way also against its habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), which is against what of its structure has internalized and that affects its usual dispositions and perceptions.

Little Red Riding Hood and the group work: the experiential side of the workshop

All these reflections have been proposed to students in the didactic side of the workshop, accompanied by experiential moments that will be presented here.

Group work requires workers to bring the underlying and hidden issues and feelings, often taboo subjects, to the surface in a public way, and it's not always easy to promote an authentic reciprocal exchange. In this specific case it meant challenging the bounds inmates-external students, but also teacher-students

(Gitterman, 2003; Middleman, 1990; Shulman, 1999), in a path articulated in three days.

Day 1. Edgework: meeting the wolf

The first day was dedicated to the experience of edgework, approached through the story of Little Red Riding Hood and the sensations of attraction and repulsion toward the wolf of which psychoanalysis speaks. This was presented and recognized by all the students (and the author), who were called to choose an edgework experience (without naming it) – a time when they chose to wander in the woods – and to indicate three emotions aroused.

The author asked them to write every emotion on a post-it note, collected them altogether and used a large sheet of paper to compose a "cloud." This means that the post-it notes were spread out, creating specially designated areas (clouds) dedicated to the prevailing emotions.

Edgework is closely connected to feelings of fear that usually precede the first phases of the experience (Lyng, 1990); but also, to a sense of excitement, control and omnipotence. The students also wrote on the post-it notes emotions like guilt or sadness. In their comments on the "cloud," they said they felt these feelings after the experience of edgework.

More precisely, although the detainees use "neutralization techniques" (Sykes & Matza, 2017) to minimize the consequences of their behavior,[6] they commented that they feel negative emotions (loneliness, disappointment, and repentance) whenever they think about the suffering they have caused.

The choice of not naming the experience of edgework they were thinking about (the crime they committed, for inmates) is connected to the respect of confidentiality (Standards for Social Group Work, AASWG, 2015). As it happens with other professionals working with mixed group (Kirwan, 2013), in this case it was important, at the beginning of the workshop, to contract procedures including the identification and clarification of group purpose, the definition of how much personal information they can share, behavioral standards and norms needed to actualize group goals.

In the light of this first confidential immersion into the history of Little Red Riding Hood, the students were divided into groups, with the aim of writing three different parts of a new version of the fairy tale. This new version had to speak about the experience of the detainees, constructing a collective history.

Each external student facilitated a micro-group of detainees so that they (the students) could practice basic group work skills, a task that is rare in social work degree courses (Sweifach & LaPorte, 2009, 2013). The three different themes were:

(1) Who is Little Red Riding Hood? (who and how you were before your trip in the woods)

(2) What the meeting with the Wolf represented for you (what it means to go beyond the limit)
(3) How is being with the Wolf? (what kind of emotions it arouses)

Day 2. Desistance: how to exit from the belly of the wolf

Taking advantage of Zipes's criticisms of Bettelheim, but softening the gender content,[7] the intent of the workshop was not to pressure the students (detainees and external) to "follow the mother's directions," to bring them back to the right path. Feminist reflections have brought attention to some issues of fundamental interest to the group, such as: if and how to deal the wolf, what it means if the wolf is a part of us, how can we free ourselves when following the wolf has led us to feel trapped, to whom and how we can ask for help or if we cannot do it ourselves.

To explore these themes, the students were confronted with three versions of Little Red Riding Hood: *Conte de la mère-grand* (the version of the Nivernais), *Le petit Chaperon rouge* by Charles Perrault, and *Rotkappchen*, by the Brothers Grimm. The ideas gathered by the feminist criticisms and the comparison with the three different versions of Little Red Riding Hood introduced some more properly criminological reflections on the desistance from crime and on the rhizomatic paths that lead in that direction (Binik, 2018).

Narratives help one to understand that every life contains many stories, containing countless themes (Abels, 2016). So, when is it possible to save ourselves from the wolf, like the Little Red Riding Hood did in the earliest oral versions? When is it necessary to accept an external help from the hunter (a "hook of change")? How much freedom do we have, how much are we instead bound by the social structures to which we belong? The reflections gathered around these questions were developed on another day by four working groups that, once again, have written about different topics, and with the external students taking the role of facilitators with a micro-group, enabling them to practice basic group work skills.

(1) Who was or is the hunter for you, if there is one (who is helping you)?
(2) What opportunities can you seize to get out of the wolf's belly?
(3) What are your current desires?
(4) What do you ask the society?

These arguments were inspired by the multiple endings of Little Red Riding Hood, a narrative which, used in a social work group, don't identify people as "problem members"; on the contrary, it is liberating and open to possibility (Abels, 2016).

Day 3: World Café: the participative writing

On the final day of the workshop, the seven topics dealt with in subgroups – i.e. the seven phases of history – were read aloud through a spokesperson (sometimes a detainee, sometimes an external student) and discussed by the extended group. We then proceeded to paste each piece and restructure the story, dividing it this time into four parts, with each entrusted once more to an external student with the role of facilitator.

The aim was to arrive at a final version of the text, possibly enhanced by the comparison and contribution by all participants. To do this we chose to resort to the technique of the World Café (Aldred, 2009; Brown, 2010), this meant that each of the four external students was responsible for a part of the text which they would work on in four 20-minute sessions while collaborating with inmates. Four times, at the end of the 20 minutes, each prisoner abandoned his subgroup to join another, until he completed the round and was able to give his contribution to all parts of the story. The (difficult) task of the students was to collect the suggestions and guide the discussion, introducing the necessary cuts and corrections, summarizing what was achieved whenever a new group was composed.

Not without some inevitable difficulties, linked above all to the different styles of speaking and interacting of prisoners, a final version was reached, read in plenary by four spokesmen. The text, subjected to final editing by the author, is what you can read below:

> We are Little Red Riding Hood.
>
> We come from different countries of the world and therefore also our origins, cultures and mentalities are very varied. The first thing we share is love for our distant families, especially for our children. We are also all convinced that life is like a river: it flows, between obstacles and dangers, but it can be a truly wonderful experience.
>
> When we met the wolf, we had the opportunity to choose to get out of a space that was close to us, made only of rules and precision. In some cases, we have been naive and immature and this has led us into difficult situations but we want to tell the truth: the fault is not of the wolf, we have chosen to follow him. The wolf does not force us but tempts us and can represent the mirror of our hungry soul.
>
> Some of us were even born and raised in a pack of wolves, in that case it was even more difficult to sniff out the path so as not to turn into predators.
>
> They asked us what it is like to be with the wolf: the contact with this creature gave us a sense of omnipotence, adrenaline and excitement, we were afraid but also, we feel able to control everything. Thoughts, those came only after.
>
> We are Little Red Riding Hood.

Or maybe we are also the Wolf.Inside us there is evil and good: we would like to understand how to manage balance and enhance nuances. It's very difficult.

In the woods, with the basket full of our best memories, each of us followed his path, for some more impenetrable, for others less. Now we all find ourselves here, side by side in the belly of the wolf: devoured.

In here we try every day to forgive ourselves and others for the actions we have committed. We try, with difficulty, even if others do not forgive us. Forgiveness cannot be expected, it is a fact. So, we keep on knocking, sometimes answers come.

For example, we met the school here (in some cases too much): we understood once inside that it is fundamental to build a future and to determine oneself, so as not to be trapped. The worst trap, in reality, we tend to set it by ourselves: it is an obsessive dance with the wolf, a relentlessly possessed dance. It happens when we are in a hurry to reach our goals, when we want more and more, when we feel we can never satisfy ourselves but also when we are afraid to find ourselves alone and abandoned, afraid of not being able to manage our impulsiveness, fear of returning to the point of departure. It's all very difficult.

To get out of here we would like to do it alone but also learn to ask the Hunters for help (be it a cell mate, a volunteer, some of our families, or anyone who lends us a hand) to understand who we are and what we really want.

For now, we have understood that the trauma has led us to an awareness that allows us to read a part of ourselves that we never thought we would have to face. Our heart has been shattered and at the moment with the golden glue we are enhancing every crack.

We would like society to recognize our glued hearts and injury to affect us in a less painful way. We would like to be considered truly human. We would like not to wear masks. We would like to appreciate everything that surrounds us. Above all, we would like to become complete creatures, no longer fragmented: take everything positive about the wolf and be in synergy with it, without dominating it or being dominated by it.

Who knows how it will be to find our wood again, who knows if someone will help us manage the horror of our naked identity, out of here? We continue to knock.

Conclusion

The intent of the participatory narrative inspired by Little Red Riding Hood was to give a form to the disorder of the experiences lived by the group. The group work presented herein was with inmates – people living on the margins – with the aim of helping them to find a story and to better negotiate boundaries between the world inside and outside of prison, between deviance and conformity, between inmates and students and between the Bad Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood.

The goal of these meetings was not the redemption of the prisoners, nor a kind of therapy. Specifically, the aim was to focus on common ground in the lives of the detainees, thus constructing a new story that looks like a trace, constitutively precarious, useful above all to raise new questions rather than to provide answers.

Due to the short duration of the workshop, a limit that emerges in the new fairy tale written by the group is the removal of the conflict dimension, especially in the last part of the text. The conflict was visible instead in some discussions, for example, through expression of anger toward institutions.

Why doesn't a conflict appear in the new fairy tale? It is possible that individual experiences were very different, that a common view of society was lacking (or not sufficiently solicited), but also that the model of the fairy tale pushed to reclaim certain passions, in search of a text considered to be pleasant.

Despite the burdens of the daily experience of detention, during the workshop a playful and creative climate was created. The external students found the path sometimes difficult, but touching. The same was true for detainees. After some months, the author encountered some of inmates during a conference in jail and they told they continued reflect on and joke about Little Red Riding Hood.

It appeared that a positive atmosphere emerged, as well as the strong need on the part of the prisoners to be recognized as persons endowed with a right to thought and play, able to attend a university course, sitting alongside other students.

In this frame of dialogue between inside and outside the prison, the most incisive image certainly remains that of Little Red Riding Hood, "who perhaps is also the Wolf." It is an image common in contemporary re-appropriation of this fairy tale (Ghesquiere, 2006), that suggests the urgency of embracing ambiguity (Greenhill & Matrix, 2010; Khom & Greenhill, 2014). Now we can imagine how to spread this version of the fairy tale, giving it the possibility to challenge new boundaries and using it, as Gianni Rodari claimed, to stimulate and accommodate all hypotheses.

Notes

1 The lunch breaks, shared with the students in an area outside the prison, separate from the prisoners, became extremely precious moments to share feedback on the workshop, especially for the least experienced student.

2 Considered by many to be Italy's most important twentieth-century writer for children, Gianni Rodari was awarded the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1970.

3 Many crime films have been dedicated to Little Red Riding Hood, hardening political discourses around criminal responsibility and growing public fears of random violence and predatory strangers (see Greenhill & Khom, 2013; Khom & Greenhill, 2014).

4 In the "Nivernais" version, used in the workshop, Little Red Riding Hood is naked and goes to bed with the wolf but, having sensed the dangerous situations he pretends to

have to pee. The wolf ties a thread to her foot and lets her go, a thread that the girl knots at a plum and thus manages to escape.

5 For example, one detainee said he wasn't able to understand what was happening when he committed the crime.

6 Moral: Children, especially attractive, well-bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say "wolf," but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.

7 The gender contents were not investigated exclusively because they would have required a deviation too demanding from the planned route. It was not a simple renunciation because a strong training need on these issues emerged clearly from the group discussions.

Disclosure statement

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